ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE A17

THE WASHINGTON POST
9 April 1981

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Soviet Intentions Are Grimly Assessed

Ever since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan caught them by surprise, our intelligence services have taken a pessimistic view of the Kremlin's intentions in any situation. Few analysts want to be on record as having underestimated Soviet aggressiveness.

The current Polish crisis, for example, has been the subject of feverish study and interpretation by experts at the Defense Intelligence Agency, Central Intelligence Agency and State Department. A series of special "alert memorandums" has been sent to the president over the past several months.

The assessment of Soviet intentions is generally grim. The military analysts have warned that the Russians might move to occupy Poland as early as this week. A top-secret CIA estimate said D-Day could be this coming Friday, not before.

But largely ignored in the spate of gloomy predictions of a Russian military move are the economic and political factors the old men in the Kremlin must consider before they make an irretrievable decision to use force against the recalcitrant Poles.

The economic consequences particularly have been given short shrift; yet they are important to the Soviet bloc. East Germany, for example, is heavily dependent on coal supplies from Poland. Irregular deliveries in the recent months of strikes and disruption have caused a 4 percent drop in production in some basic East German industries.

Furthermore, according to CIA estimates, a Soviet occupation of Poland would cost the Kremlin $10 billion a year — a sum the Soviet economy could not absorb without serious disruption.

Politically, the guarded optimists in our intelligence agencies point out, Soviet boss Leonid Brezhnev is regarded as a "consensus guy." He would be reluctant to pursue a military solution to the Polish problem without support from the other Eastern European satellites. "Brezhnev doesn't want to be alone," an analyst said.

East Germany and Czechoslovakia, which, with Russia, constitute Poland's immediate neighbors, are believed to be supporting the Kremlin. But Romania is reported to be a reluctant ally.

Added to this is the certain hostility of the West and the almost-certain disapproval of Third World nations. At a recent closed-door meeting with top Reagan administration officials, 10 Republican senators got a promise from the administration that "the strongest economic sanctions" against the Soviet Union would follow any military takeover of Poland.

There is also, of course, a purely military consideration that may give the Russians pause. The Poles have the best army among the satellite nations, and the rank-and-file may resist. Though their officers have been pretty thoroughly Sovietized by purges and indoctrination, Polish generals have warned Soviet colleagues that the lower ranks will not submit peacefully to a Russian invasion.

The Poles did not let the hopelessness of their situation stop them, in 1939, when they were attacked simultaneously by Germany and Russia.

With some relief, State Department intelligence experts have noted privately that Brezhnev's highly publicized meeting in Prague includes mostly low-level Politburo functionaries. Only the Czech hosts sent top officials, leading some analysts to believe that nothing substantive will result from the meeting.

Balanced against all these factors, however, is the concern that may prove decisive to the Kremlin: allowing the Poles the kind of personal freedoms and independence from Soviet authority that they seem determined to achieve would be simply too threatening to the entire Soviet system. If the Poles can get away with it, why not the Romanians, Hungarians, Czechs and East Germans? Why not even the Russians?

Self-preservation may override all other considerations as the Kremlin's hawks and doves argue. From their point of view, Poland may be a cancer that requires drastic surgery if it is not to spread throughout the communist empire.